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## Discourses of entrepreneurial leadership: Exposing myths and exploring new approaches

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## **Abstract**

This article explores gender and entrepreneurial leadership, notably the meanings female entrepreneurs ascribe to notions of entrepreneurial leadership. Drawing from interviews with female business owners, the article questions the dominant hegemonic masculine entrepreneurial leadership model as well as that reportedly associated with women. Research findings illuminate the fluidity and variability of the entrepreneurial leadership construct. Our feminist poststructural lens and critical leadership stance adds new insight into the multiple subjectivities of entrepreneurs and surfaces contradiction and tension that shape the very sense of their entrepreneurial selves. By questioning accepted knowledge, this research offers new perspectives on the multiple realities of entrepreneurial leadership, which should be heeded by policy makers, academics and practitioners alike.

## **Keywords**

Entrepreneurial leadership, gender, female entrepreneurs, critical leadership studies, poststructural feminisms

## **Introduction**

Notions of who is the entrepreneur and what constitutes such an individual are debated in a range of literatures pertaining to entrepreneurship studies, strategic management, small business inquiries and economic theory (Gartner, 2010; Wennekers and Thurik, 1999). What is perhaps more surprising is that within these writings, the literature holds a strong assumption that the entrepreneur is a heroic, rational man (Ogbor, 2000). Standard descriptions of the entrepreneur are based on masculine norms and traits such that the very entrepreneurial identity is constructed primarily as an embodied man (Smith and Anderson, 2003). This has led, in recent years to a small but growing critique of the gendered concept of the entrepreneur and for the need to draw on feminist theorising that enables alternative understandings to surface (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Stead, 2015).

The ongoing privileging of masculine norms of behaviour within entrepreneurial studies has resulted in conflicted identities for female entrepreneurs (García and Welter, 2013). This tension is reflected in debates on female entrepreneurs' leadership style. This nascent but emerging body of research (Moore et al., 2011) exposes how traditional approaches to the study of entrepreneurs align the successful entrepreneurial leader with connotations of both men and masculinity (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). An important characteristic of success is achieving business and economic growth. In other words, the rational effective entrepreneur who leads his company according to the hegemonic masculine norms of logic, rationality and reason is much more likely to grow his business whilst the female entrepreneur who is deemed to be more closely associated with feminine norms of relational behaviours and emotion deviates from the image of the successful entrepreneur (Chaganti, 1986). In short, the successful entrepreneur is associated with a universal and seemingly ahistoric model of economic rationality which excludes all those who do not fit such a stereotype (Calás et al., 2009). Despite the number of studies which contest the assumption that female entrepreneurs adopt a unique and/or problematic leadership style (see for example Alsos and Ljunggren, 1998; Cliff et al., 2005 and Wilson and Tagg, 2010), there remains an implicit assumption that there is a model of a successful (male) entrepreneurial leader against which female entrepreneurs should be judged (Ahl, 2006).

This study aims to explore the meaning that female entrepreneurs ascribe to notions of entrepreneurial leadership, including close attention to the ways in which gender and leadership feature in their accounts and the ways in which this illuminates their performance as entrepreneurs. Very few studies have explored the influence of gender on female entrepreneurs' leadership (Harrison et al., 2015). Furthermore, as illustrated below, such studies have focused mainly on female entrepreneurs' identity in relation to the dominant hegemonic and androcentric discourses of entrepreneurship. This paper further responds to the recent call by Harrison et al. (2015) for researchers to explore the interface between leadership and entrepreneurship using a gendered analytic lens. It extends the findings of early studies in a number of ways. Firstly, the paper brings to light a plethora of new meanings associated with the notion of *entrepreneurial leadership* that suggest the fluidity of the very concept. Secondly, these multiple, fluid meanings reveal how the entrepreneurs' sense of their everyday subjectivities go beyond the hegemonic entrepreneurial discourse and embrace multifarious social and potentially conflicting identities. Finally, this study exposes

the tension created by the ongoing privileging of the dominant gendered leadership behaviour which valorises economic growth.

In order to achieve the study's aim and to advance debates on gender and entrepreneurial leadership, the article is located within a feminist poststructural perspective and informed by an emerging body of literature collectively referred to as Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) (Collinson, 2011; Ford, 2010; Harding et al., 2011). CLS is defined as 'the broad, diverse and heterogeneous perspectives that share a concern to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are often produced, frequently rationalised, sometimes resisted and occasionally transformed' (Collinson, 2011: 181). CLS scholars frequently draw from the more established field of Critical Management Studies (CMS), which has long sought to provide a critique and challenge to the taken-for-granted assumptions in mainstream management theorising; to expose asymmetrical power dynamics; and to open up new ways of thinking and alternative forms of organising and managing (Ford, 2016). Leadership studies are such a vast area of study and researchers within the field have already explored various transitions in thinking in numerous publications over the years (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2013; Yukl, 2014). This article focuses more on gendered debates within the developing body of work within CLS so as to consider the ways in which such critical thinking can shed new light and expose contemporary privileging within entrepreneurship studies.

Research on gendered aspects of organization theory has traditionally been neglected, with such debates only surfacing from the 1970s (Acker and Van Houten, 1974). Mainstream organization theory was perceived by several commentators as 'premised on a malestream discourse in which organizations supposedly adjust to the appearance of women... who are presumed not to belong there' (Hearn and Parkin 1993: 149). As Legge (1995) noted, even texts that claim to discuss people related organizational topics fail to consider questions associated with gender, women, men, femininity and masculinity. The gendered organization field has therefore sought to rewrite organization theory and research such that women's experiences and voices, and the lives of 'men as men', are represented, rather than silenced (Calás and Smircich, 1992; Martin and Collinson, 2002). Such pioneering work has created opportunity to generate new insights on the 'gendered structure of organizations, the practices and policies that perpetuate unequal power, rewards and opportunities, the interpersonal interactions that confirm and recreate gendered patterns and the ideologies that support these

processes' (Acker, 1998: 195). More recently, research on emotions, sexuality, materiality and embodiment have added considerably to our knowledge of gender and organization (Pullen and Vacchani, 2013).

Adopting critical approaches encourages fresh insights and interpretation of a range of underlying topics including entrepreneurial leadership, the focus of this article. Envisioning entrepreneurial leaders through a feminist poststructural perspective exposes assumptions relating to gender neutrality and makes possible an exploration of why people at work operate in the ways that they do, and why organizations are organized and policies enacted in the ways that they are (Ely et al., 2003).

The article is organised as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature on gender and entrepreneurial leadership studies. This is followed by an exploration of critical leadership accounts, located within a feminist poststructural theoretical lens. A longitudinal study of life history narratives of women business owners (as entrepreneurial leaders), are explored. A discussion ensues of the findings and questioning of accepted knowledge on entrepreneurial leadership. The article concludes with new insights into multiple and conflicting realities of entrepreneurial leadership and the implications of such challenges for policy makers, academics and practitioners.

## **Gender and entrepreneurial leadership**

Ongoing debates within entrepreneurial leadership research continue to make implicit assumptions that leaders are men, with male stereotypic powers, attitudes and obligations. The type of behaviour thus deemed appropriate for entrepreneurs coincides with images of masculinity and centres around rationality, measurement, objectivity, control and competitiveness. Both mainstream literature and the reported practice of entrepreneurial leadership have consistently failed to question its gendered nature (Hamilton, 2006; Marlow et al., 2009; Patterson and Mavin, 2009). It is the masculine voice that governs entrepreneurial discourse and exchange, the worlds of business and the economy (Burrell, 1992; Hampton et al., 2009; Harding, 2003).

Relatively few authors, however, have sought to explore how gender and gender relations shape the entrepreneurial leadership experience. One such study is Bruni's (2004)

ethnographic account of two small firms in Italy, which examines how entrepreneurs – both men and women - construct their entrepreneurial leadership selves. Different forms of gendered and entrepreneurial selves are found to co-exist alongside the hegemonic masculine model. This observation led Bruni to conclude that entrepreneurship and gender are fluid constructs that are “*constantly moving between different symbolic spaces*” (p.407). More recently, García and Welter’s (2013) research highlights the complexity of the strategies that female entrepreneurs apply to accounts of their working lives: some women associate themselves with the image of the male entrepreneur whilst others seek to reconcile both discourses by claiming that they are motivated by growth but at the same time emphasise their conformity to their ascribed gender role as the main family carer. Yet another group challenges the notion that there is conflict between being a women and an entrepreneur. Adding further to the complexity, some participants shift between identities and adopt various leadership practices in different situations. García and Welter (2013) conclude that gender identity is a dynamic process as female entrepreneurs construct their identities in a multiplicity of ways. Welch et al. (2008) also consider how gender and gender relations shape the experience of female entrepreneurs in the context of export activities. Their research participants shared various perceptions of how being a woman affected their experience. The authors account for this difference through the varied contexts in which respondents operate including their foreign markets and industries. They conclude that women’s perception of their experience change in relation to the evolution of their businesses. Lewis (2006), however, reports a more subordinating image of female entrepreneurs with research participants stressing their similarity with male entrepreneurs and the neutrality of business standards. These findings lead the author to warn against ignoring differences and biased standards arguing that this stance perpetuates the gendered nature of entrepreneurship. Similarly, Nadin’s (2007) research investigates the narratives of two female entrepreneurs to explore how they negotiated their identities in the light of stereotyping of women business owners in the care industry as ruthless owners who made profit out of vulnerable people. Her participants distance themselves from the profit motive and mobilise the image of woman as carer (Nadin, 2007). In contrast, Lewis (2015) reports that her participant (GF), the owner of a renowned shoe brand, distances herself from small business owners and self-employed individuals. GF associates her entrepreneurial identity with the firm performance and as the company performance grew stronger so did her entrepreneurial identity. Finally, Wilson and Tagg (2010) explore how female and male entrepreneurs construct the image of each other.

The authors report that both sexes used the same attributes to describe the opposite sex and that neither women nor men identified themselves as heroes or entrepreneurs.

Despite the emergence and divergence of findings of such studies on gender and entrepreneurship, their influence remains somewhat limited in entrepreneurship studies owing to the continuing dominance of positivist research studies and fixed notions of entrepreneurial leadership (Hughes et al., 2012). There remains an absolute and yet unspoken association between the embodied man and the entrepreneurial leader, and the privileging of masculine behaviours and norms as the basis for effective leadership within the entrepreneurial context. Accordingly, men are more readily portrayed as meeting the competences and characteristics that are central to the behaviour of entrepreneurs, whereas women are associated with the ‘feminine’ characteristics of caring, nurturing, and sharing that are allegedly more appropriate for the domestic sphere and the reproduction of the home and the family (Calás et al., 2009; Ford, 2006). As a consequence, women have come to accept their fate of being perceived through the deficit model when compared to men (Marlow, 2002). This argument continues to inform much of the contemporary policy agenda (Marlow et al., 2008) and is also well rehearsed within entrepreneurial leadership studies as reflected in Changanti’s (1986) research, where the “*feminine entrepreneur*” is compared to the “*successful entrepreneur*” as two contrasting entrepreneurial modes of being (Mirchandani, 1999). Moreover, mainstream studies have not taken into consideration the personal meanings attached by female entrepreneurs to their own experience (Dodd and Anderson, 2007).

In order to open the field of study to new conceptualisations of the entrepreneur, this article adopts a feminist poststructural epistemology, located within CLS. Poststructural perspectives permit a subjective and intersubjective view, which in turn encourages a greater appreciation of the complexities of individual’s working lives, and work relationships, on which notions of leadership need to be built (Weedon, 1997). The adoption of CLS and poststructuralism responds to recent calls by a number of scholars for an epistemological shift and for more critical studies that question current wisdom on entrepreneurship and that include considerations of female entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Hamilton, 2014). The next section explores this turn to CLS and to poststructuralism as the theoretical lens guiding this study.

### **Theoretical Background: Critical Leadership Studies and Poststructuralism**



Critical Leadership Studies is an emerging and relatively new collective of approaches to studying and conceptualising leadership that enables not only a critical challenge to traditional approaches to studying leadership, but also encourages us to advance our understanding of what leadership might be and how it emerges through discursive accounts. CLS comprises an array of approaches and perspectives informed by a diversity of views and ideas that seek to contest central and mainstream perspectives that have until now dominated leadership studies. We share Sutherland's (2015) belief that CLS perspectives have been centre-stage in developing our ability to make sense of leadership, albeit that most empirical study to date within CLS communities has looked at large, centralised and highly structured organizations where leadership is concentrated at the top of the hierarchy. To date, smaller entrepreneurial organizations have been notably absent from such study. A CLS approach to our research therefore provides an opportunity to rethink entrepreneurial leadership through drawing on fresh approaches to the study of entrepreneurs. Furthermore, our study is located within feminist poststructural thinking which recognise the significance of context and the role and power of discourse in shaping work and social practices.

Poststructural thinking stimulates a challenge to the concept of the coherent and rational individual of western philosophical tradition; that of the disembodied subject governed by conscious and logical thought. It seeks to dismantle the predominant assumptions of whole and coherent subjects with a singular sense of identity and a fixed essence, and to draw attention to the shifting, complex and at times contradictory subject positions and plurality of subjectivities through which we come to recognise our selves (Bloom and Munro, 1995; Weedon, 1997). Hence, key to this research is the diversity and temporality of subjectivity; the contextual location of the entrepreneurial leaders and the partiality of their accounts of the self, and the recognition that our sense of selves 'are inextricably intertwined with context and with the situations in which they are performed, as well as the historic and political discourses and culturally shaped narrative conventions that construct the self' (Kondo, 1990: 307). It is not so much the unambiguous that we seek to study in this research, but rather the breaks, conflicts and contradictions in interview narratives. It is through this theoretical perspective that we sought to make sense of the working lives of these entrepreneurs in their leadership roles. This necessitated an in-depth life history approach, which captures the subjectively experienced and contextually specific storied accounts of the female entrepreneurs.

## **Research Approach and Methodology**

In her seminal work Moore (1990), notes the lack of a uniform definition of entrepreneurship and entrepreneur. She suggests that entrepreneurship is sometimes used to describe any company that is independently owned and in this case the entrepreneur is referred to as any person who owns and starts a new business. On other occasions, the terms describe the act of creating something new while assuming the risks (financial as well as social) associated with carrying out such an innovation. Others differentiate between small business ownership and entrepreneurship based on the size of employees, sales growth or the net profit achieved. In order to capture the diversity and heterogeneity of women's entrepreneurial leadership experiences and to distance ourselves from the narrow association frequently relied upon as that between entrepreneurship and growth, we adopt a broad definition. We therefore define the female entrepreneur as the leader of a business that is wholly or majority female-owned and managed (Carter and Shaw 2006).

The empirical study is located within the UK small business, entrepreneurial sector. Female entrepreneurs were accessed via a substantial database that informs the SME Knowledge Network (SMEKN) located within a University Business School. Two of the study participants (Kate and Helen) out of the total of 12 participants were invited from the database to participate in the research on female entrepreneurs and their working lives as leaders. The others were recruited via snowball sampling approaches from a range of positions and entrepreneurial experiences. The study adopted life history approaches, which sought to provide a context against which the working lives and career stories of these female entrepreneurs can be understood. We encouraged participants to describe their past, present and future career/life histories. Three of these women (Kate, Helen and Dawn) were interviewed twice over a period of 18 months and their in-depth accounts of their working lives form the basis of the analysis for this article. Their accounts were most relevant to the focus of this study of entrepreneurial leadership.

This decision to focus on a small number of participants is consistent with life history research approaches (Thompson, 2000). Of central importance in life history studies, is the ability to capture the uniqueness of each narrative and the wealth of meanings embedded within these accounts. This of course includes the narrator's subjectivity in terms of how s/he

makes sense of their life events (Abrams, 2010). Life history approaches embrace the voices of the marginalised, exploring the fluidity of experiences and subjectivities as well as the interaction with the wider environment (Armitage and Gluck, 1998). All these features of qualitative life history approaches are enhanced when the research analyses a very small sample of narratives in some depth (Guy, 2010). Indeed, writers argue that one interview is considered to be sufficient when it comes to generating rich accounts of a person's experience (Thompson, 2000). Given this knowledge of in-depth methods, the question of how many female entrepreneurs should be interviewed is less pertinent for this study. What is more meaningful however is the degree to which these narratives capture the lived experiences and depth of accounts that we seek to portray below.

First of all, we briefly introduce our entrepreneurial leaders. Kate (a marketing consultant) and Helen (a human resource consultant) reached senior positions within the corporate business sector prior to setting up their own businesses whereas Dawn set up her business (in the fashion industry) as soon as she graduated from university. As details on age, marital status and number of children are not usually included when studying male entrepreneurs (Greene et al., 2003) we chose not to impart this information in this article. We felt that by entering such biographic details we ran the risk of perpetuating the assumption that female entrepreneurs set up their business mainly to achieve some form of work life balance (Patterson and Mavin, 2009).

Each of the two sets of interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and were held within the women's work places. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and were assured of both confidentiality and anonymity. Interview transcripts were analysed through immersion in the data involving close reading and several re-readings, resulting in the emergence of several related themes. Life history analytic approaches were adopted, drawing from McAdams theoretical and methodological approach to personal narratives (Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993). The analysis adopts a critical approach to the ways in which life history, as part of a project of the self, can provide a link between "between the past, present and future through the vector of the self" (Grey, 1994: 481).

Critical inquiries move the analysis beyond the exploration of the individual to the investigation of the role of the environment in shaping the person's experience (Gubrium and

Holstein, 1998). This shift increases the complexity of the analysis. In our study this complexity is further intensified by the richness of the data gathered through life history interviews. In order to deal with this complexity, it is common in critical narrative tradition that researchers do not use all the collected data (Atkinson, 2001; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). We therefore applied Gubrium and Holstein's (1998) notion of "*Analytic bracketing*" (p.165) whereby the analysis focuses only on certain aspects of the story. The decision as to which parts to analyse was determined by the study's objectives and guiding theoretical lens (Riessman, 2008). The analysis was therefore carried out against the backdrop of gender and entrepreneurial leadership using a feminist poststructural lens.

The over-riding sense emerging from the analysis of the entrepreneurs' accounts was one of paradox and multiplicity both within and across research participants in relation to their subjectivities as entrepreneurial leaders. A range of accounts of the entrepreneurs' ongoing stories were identifiable as participants drew on wide-ranging, often conflicting discourses to describe their working lives. An iterative process of extracting core accounts from the interviews was adopted as we sought to identify discrete themes that captured ways in which participants made sense of their life and career histories.

### **Empirical study findings**

Three primary and inter-related themes emerge in relation to entrepreneurial leadership, which are referred to as living the passion; making a difference in peoples' lives; and valorising masculinity in entrepreneurial leadership practices. These themes are explored below.

#### ***Theme one: The entrepreneurial leader as living the passion***

This theme represents ways in which the female entrepreneurs share their passionate attachments to their whole lives. Three different types of passion emerged: innovation (Helen), fashion (Dawn) and supporting the family (Kate). The participants' accounts show how passion strongly shapes both the process and the outcome of their entrepreneurial leadership journeys. This is exemplified in Helen's story. Helen's passion is the ability to be constantly creative; to innovate and develop new ways of working and thinking that challenge the status quo and offer fresh ideas for her product market within HR consultancy. She describes herself as "*an idea factory*". Her passion for relentless creativity and generation

of new concepts and insights for the HR community permeates her leadership accomplishments with her vision, her products and her market development. She says:

*“I went off and developed my business and it changes all the time because that is me. I will think of a different way of delivering something, another income stream. So all the way along I have been like that”.*

In line with Ma and Tan’s (2006) writings, passion has positively influenced the process and the outcome of the participants’ entrepreneurial leadership. Dawn for instance describes how her passion has been a source of energy, enthusiasm and confidence which enables her to grow her fashion venture. In describing her and her partner’s business strategy, she adds:

*“We both had a passion for dressing up and for creative clothing. It wasn’t very conscious it was let us make some clothes and then our friends liked them and then we sold them on a market stall and then that fuelled the passion and the interest and then we started seeing if we could sell off to shops”.*

What emerges from the research participants’ accounts is that their entrepreneurial leadership is embedded in (non-monetary) passion for and utter commitment to what they do. Not one of the entrepreneurs perceived economic growth as the ultimate goal of their business. Indeed, where finances are mentioned, they relate to opportunities created to enhance their passion. By way of illustration, Helen emphasises that she values her profit only because it enables her to continue to be creative and innovative in her entrepreneurial endeavours.

*“My plan is that I will grow that part of the business until (it) provides all of the income I need to develop all the things I want to start developing”.*

While Helen sees growth as means to an end (rather than the end in itself which seems to be the focus of many entrepreneurial accounts in the mainstream debates), Kate envisages growth as an actual threat to her very ways of working and an impediment to her ability to fulfil her passion in terms of supporting her family and spending quality time with them.

*“I don’t judge my success on how many people I’m going to be employing in the next 5 years or how many clients I’ve got or what my turnover is. If I was trying to build me own dynasty and really pushing my business to be much bigger, I prefer to have a more balanced life. I enjoy what I do but I don’t think that work is the be all and end all. It is an important part of my life, but it is a part nevertheless. I’m only on the planet once so I want to try and you know have a balanced life while I’m here”.*

Our findings here concur with those reported by Ma and Tan (2006), such that lack of passion can be detrimental to the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial leader if it results in a boring

routine. In order to avoid this pitfall, Helen reports that if ever leading her existing venture does not allow her the opportunity to fulfil her passion for creative innovation, she will lose interest and exit the company. She maintains:

*“Eventually I will sell this business when I have ceased to enjoy being in it because, once it starts to either get to be this is the norm, this is as far as you can push this. I will get bored and once I get bored in it I can be destructive. I will sell the business”.*

Nevertheless, the influence of passion upon the process and the outcome of the entrepreneurial leadership is not always a positive force for future success. Passion can make it difficult for the entrepreneur to loosen her control over the company (Thorgren and Wincent, 2013). Such close attachment can impede the need to access vital resources and limit the development of the company leading to its ultimate failure as mirrored in Dawn’s story when she reflects back on the reasons that led her to close down her first fashion business which was designing and selling women’s clothing. She suggests:

*“If we had some outside mentor they would be more objective then we would have managed to made ourselves safer. But at the time, I wasn’t interested, I didn’t want anyone else interfering with my business. We were far too wrapped up in our world to even listen to anyone. We did have people want to get involved; investors, mentors, directors but we just didn’t feel the need and didn’t see the need”.*

The passionate attachment of each of the entrepreneurs was central to their working lives and served as prime motivators for all three women. This theme challenged the hegemonic rationality and the assumptions about individualism and profit maximisation in which it would be deemed illogical to study both emotion and passion in relation to entrepreneurial leadership (Cardon et al., 2005). It is nevertheless striking that this theme has been core to other entrepreneurs’ accounts (as presented by Steve Jobs in media interviews, that ‘passion is everything’<sup>1</sup>), and yet the concept has attracted little attention in entrepreneurial leadership studies (with the exception of the work of Cardon and colleagues). The theme also adds new insights into the relationship between passion and entrepreneurial leadership as previous studies have failed to acknowledge the source of entrepreneurial passion or alternatively, they have conceptualised passion merely as a personal trait, rather than as having a role in shaping the entrepreneurial leadership process (Cardon et al., 2009).

## ***Theme 2: Entrepreneurial leadership: making a difference in people’s lives***

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<sup>1</sup> We accessed this quote on <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/220515>

The participants talked about three different groups of people for whom their work made a difference and each of these are explored below in relation to their community, their clients and their staff.

*Making a difference for the community.* In entrepreneurship studies, enriching communities is linked with social entrepreneurs (Mueller et al., 2011). Although our participants are not social entrepreneurs they are nevertheless keen to add value to their communities. This led them to offer support to local entrepreneurs which Kate describes as “*being a bit of a critical friend*” as they make their counterparts “*stop and think*” about their ventures. This reflexive dialogue is crucial for the leader’s learning (Ford and Harding, 2007). In line with Leitch et al.’s (2013) research, such informal interaction between entrepreneurs is also central to long-term development of entrepreneurial leadership. Helen, for example, narrates how her intervention enabled her hairdresser to better lead her own business and as a consequence, she was better prepared to survive the recent recession. Helen reflects:

*“I am adding that value to businesses. I got a great deal of enjoyment. My hairdresser, through the recession, was having a bad time. She was saying “I might not be able to survive this recession”. So I went into her salon on a Sunday and kind of brainstormed some idea and over the last eighteen months her business is now pretty strong”.*

Dawn’s entrepreneurial leadership talents have also extended beyond her trading life. After closing down her business, Dawn draws on her past entrepreneurial experience to add value to nascent entrepreneurs by sharing her insights, knowledge and pitfalls with them. She explains:

*“I am doing business support and helping students who start their own business because I was one of those students twenty five, thirty years ago starting my own business so I know where they are coming from”.*

What surfaces from these accounts is that these entrepreneurs were keen to share their career accounts and their experience of both good and bad practices that had been part of their working lives to date. There emerged a sense of responsibility to help others to learn from their successes as well as their mistakes.

*Making a difference for customers.* What appears from the accounts of these women is that the entrepreneurial leadership endeavour is also about innovation and creating new permutations that add value to customers. It also requires anticipating needs for new products and services which add value (Schumpeter, 1934). Because of the supremacy of the economic

growth discourse over entrepreneurship studies, there is a prevailing assumption that the relationship of the entrepreneurs to their customers is mainly driven by profit maximisation (Kirchhoff, 1991). Data from the participants within our study generate a challenge to this notion and very much give centre-stage to the consumers of their products and services. Kate's account of her core driver for her work emphasises that adding value to her customer is a source of pride and the very *raison d'être* of her business rather than that of profit maximisation. She says:

*"I just bank the cheque and move onto the next job. The thing I'm most proud of is, I have a large (client's name) that I work for and they are really going from strength to strength, and I am part of that. I added value to other people's businesses, that is entirely what I exist to do really. If I wasn't doing that I wouldn't be doing my job so I would just pack up".*

Helen also stresses how making a difference for her customers is an integral part of the success of her entrepreneurial leadership. She adds:

*"I am proud that we are delivering a great quality HR to clients that value it and they are more than willing to pay. I think we are adding great value to small companies that need that expertise. So I am very proud of the fact that we can add value in a way that they like it. There is a big desire in me to help to make things better. We all care and every client matters that is our values".*

The next sub-theme explores the rich relationship with their staff.

*Making a difference for the staff.* Mainstream accounts of entrepreneurial leaders seem to place considerable emphasis on the need to be perfect and faultless beings who also expect those who work with them to share such flawless existences. Such accounts do not feature in the stories of these entrepreneurs. Helen for example indicates that her entrepreneurial leadership approach is far from perfect and that she needs to work with a team who can complement her skills and enable her to add value to their clients. She recognises the impossibility of the perfect being that many mainstream accounts of leaders and entrepreneurs appear to require (Ford and Harding, 2011), and recognises the importance of building a team of staff with complementary skills and talents who can meet the range of business needs. Helen reflects:

*"So I have learned over the years to build people round me who have got the skills that I don't have."*



Helen appreciates the role played by her staff and she strives to add value to their careers and working lives in the same way as they add value to her business. She accomplishes this by resorting to a variety of strategies including the offer of additional support and training; delegation of core projects and work tasks that play to individual's strengths; and taking the time to socialise with her team outside of office hours. Her transcripts are replete with examples of ways in which she seeks to both respond to and initiate change in her environment that enables her to make the best of those in her team. This is evident in the evolution of the relationship between Helen and her staff. Recently, Helen invested time in developing the portfolio of her company, which led her to introduce and develop new products and services. These changes have led Helen to increasingly delegate the management of her existing clients as well as other administrative tasks to her staff so as to free up her time to develop new and more innovative approaches that provide her with the opportunity to play to her strengths whilst at the same time as drawing on the talents and tapping the potential of her team. In response to her increased reliance on her employees, Helen has changed her leadership role by re-structuring her company and offering her loyal staff members a share in the business. She reports:

*“What I have decided to do is to allocate 20% of my shares to actually follow the John Lewis model and invest in my staff to give those shares to my staff so when they have been with me five years so they can become owners of this business too.”*

In summary, the dominant entrepreneurial leadership model which promotes entrepreneurship as an economic activity has framed relationships within exchange theory perspectives. According to this theory small business owners are faced with scarce resources. They therefore need to network with other agents to enhance their access to the necessary resources (Aldrich et al., 1989; Hampton et al., 2009). Relationships are thus regarded as having solely instrumental purposes that are for the achievement of economic success. The stories in this study challenge this gendered utilitarian perspective and emphasise the interpersonal and social richness of leadership as the participants' various relationships stems from their desire to make a difference in the lives of other people including their communities.

### ***Theme 3: The valorising of masculinity in leadership practice inhibits performance***

This theme illuminates ways in which entrepreneurial leadership is a site for contested and multifaceted subjectivities. The narratives of the women within the study suggest that the experiences of leader entrepreneurs in crafting their identities are complex, contradictory and

ambiguous. The previous two themes emphasise an entrepreneurial leader who is driven by passion and by making a difference to the lives and experiences of others. Such an entrepreneurial leadership model is at odds with the dominant rational masculine model which continues to be exalted for its alleged association with economic success. It is apparent, however, from these accounts that this dominant model is depicted as representing the “true” or “authentic entrepreneurial leader”. The gap between the participants’ lived entrepreneurial leadership accounts and what they perceive as the authentic entrepreneurial leader has been a source of tension that palpably inhibited (rather than enabled) the participant entrepreneurs’ performance. As illustrated earlier, Kate is passionate about supporting her family. She is not willing to build a large company and hire numerous employees as she believes this will lead her business to take over her life and consequently divert her attention and her passion away from enjoying family as well as her working life. It is ironic that the literature on female entrepreneurs tends to assume that the choice of achieving work life balance has a negative impact on performance (Shelton, 2006), and yet in practice, Kate’s company was amongst the very few local businesses which was able to survive the recent recession in the UK. In order to face the recession, Kate sought new opportunities to diversify her services. She says:

*“A big problem for many businesses at the moment is getting paid. I’ve been quite fortunate that it has not really been an issue for me but there will be millions of businesses out there that will tell it differently. I started working for 2 or 3 visitor attractions and I have kept them as clients. What has also happened is I’ve had opportunities to deliver workshops and present for people. I also do some funded consultancy work. So I’ve got three strands to my business and that is a good position to be in”.*

Despite her success in terms of achieving what she perceives as a balanced life while also surviving the recession, Kate’s narrative would suggest that she is not particularly proud of her entrepreneurial leadership success. Throughout her interview, Kate referred to her business, or anything related to it (such as the networks that she has developed), by using pejorative words such as *small*, *microscopic*, and *tiny*. She appears to constantly play down her success through using diminutive language when describing her entrepreneurial endeavours. For instance Kate describes herself and her work as:

*“I’m only a sole trader so I am a very small business”  
“really absolutely microscopic business”  
“my network if you like, it is still quite small”*

She also did not perceive her business as an established venture despite the fact that she has been trading for three years.

*“I still feel like a fledgling business, 3 years isn’t really a long time, is it? But I guess to other people who are just starting up in the business journey they would probably regard me as established”.*

In this sense Kate’s confidence and pride in her enterprise has been undermined by the continued privileging of the masculine norms of leadership behaviour which valorise size, scale and growth and which in the long term may well inhibit her performance. Kate’s narrative exposes the fragmented and perhaps more vulnerable self of the entrepreneurs’ subjectivities. Although Kate pursues alternative ways of performing her entrepreneurial leadership role, she still judges herself against the dominant masculine norms of an entrepreneurial leader and finds herself lacking.

The tension between the gendered leadership normative behaviours and the participants’ lived experience is also evident in the contradictory statements in Helen’s narrative. Helen identified the entrepreneur as someone who brings change by constant innovation. She suggests:

*“I think that entrepreneurs are ideas people. I think they have lots of ideas, but, I don’t know, lots of people never put their ideas into practice”*

Although this definition matches Helen’s identity in terms of being passionate about innovation and ideas creation, she, however, could not see herself as an entrepreneur. She questions:

*“Do I think I’m an entrepreneur? Probably, I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”*

Helen’s inability to strongly identify herself as an entrepreneur is accounted for by the gendered entrepreneurial leadership image that she perceives is associated with huge growth, as illustrated in the examples she gave of the entrepreneurs living in her time.

*“There’s the obvious ones there’s the Alan Sugar’s and the Richard Branson’s of these worlds”*

Such discourses illuminate the ways in which the entrepreneurial leader is still understood through a hegemonic masculine interpretation. Once again, the type of behaviour deemed

appropriate for entrepreneurs coincides with prevailing images of masculinity and highlights rationality, logic and economic growth. The participants' notions of entrepreneurial leadership collide with the hegemonic androcentric discourse and this creates unease and ambiguity in their working lives. The participants' accounts highlight the fragmented and contradictory subjectivities of these female entrepreneurs and the ways in which such contradictions shape their sense of who they are.

## **Discussion**

This study sought to explore the meanings female entrepreneurial leaders ascribe to their working and broader lives. In line with Larty and Hamilton (2011), the life history narrative approach that was adopted in the study captured the diversity and the heterogeneity of these meanings. Despite the emergence of common themes, every participant related in multifarious ways to each of the identified themes as reflected for instance in the notion of passion which varied enormously from one participant to the other. Furthermore, the participants' entrepreneurial leadership subjectivity is embedded not only in their various passions but also in making a difference to a variety of people. Consistent with Stead's (2015) argument, this indicates that the entrepreneurs' sense of who they are go beyond the hegemonic (male) entrepreneurial discourse and extend to other features which include community and social as well as family discourses and subjectivities. This study also shows that entrepreneurial leadership is a highly fluid construct that can mean different things for different entrepreneurs and at different times. Furthermore, entrepreneurial leadership is not confined to the entrepreneur's trading activity as it can be present and influential even after the entrepreneur closes down his/her business as illuminated in Dawn's narrative.

By exhibiting a variety of impassioned attachments to their businesses, the study also challenges the literature on female entrepreneurship studies, notably to the ways in which many accounts limit women's attachment to their businesses as solely to the achievement of a balanced life. Moreover, Kate's narrative, similar to Lewis's (2015) findings, contests the prevailing assumption that the achievement of work life balance is an impediment for entrepreneurial performance (Shelton, 2006). For Kate spending quality time with her family is a passion which has positively driven her entrepreneurial leadership rather than hindered it. Kate's lived experience concurs with more recent arguments presented in this journal which suggests that work-life balance is a rich and multidimensional concept that holds a

heterogeneity of meanings which are worthy of further consideration (Duberley and Carrigan, 2012; Jayawarna et al., 2011; Patterson and Mavin, 2009).

In contradistinction to the hegemonic masculine leadership model, a number of authors celebrate the identification of a separate feminine leadership style which they perceive to accord more closely with women's values and roles as carers and their inclination to pursue social goals, community and domestic goals. These authors emphasise women's adoption of a so-called transformational leadership style that differs from the masculine rational, logical and transactional style (Brush, 1992; Buttner, 2001; Moore et al., 2011). Such a style is presumed to be built on inter-relationship, collaborative principles and engaged leadership (Rosener, 1990).

Despite this reported feminine approach to leadership however, concepts such as passion and emotion have not been studied in female entrepreneurship studies. Moreover, although on the surface the entrepreneurial leadership of our participants seems to adhere more closely to the reportedly feminine transformational style, beneath the surface are multiple and disparate approaches that these female entrepreneurial leaders identify with. The main characteristic of Helen's entrepreneurial leadership is a passion which is associated with emotion and thus with femininity. Helen's passion, however, is much more aligned with innovation which has much stronger associations with male entrepreneurs and masculinity. Dawn has also exhibited strong passion for fashion design but this emotion led her to maintain a tight control over her business, which again is frequently construed as masculine behaviour. Our analysis, therefore, highlights the flux and fluidity of meanings associated with masculinity and femininity and to the limitation of studying these notions as stable and fixed categories.

The key themes within the findings were furthermore interrelated. Closely related to the participants' desire to fulfil their passion through their entrepreneurial experience, was their desire to make a difference to the lives of many different types of people, not only those they employed and those that consumed their products and services, but also those within entrepreneurial communities. Their passions led them to expand their entrepreneurial leadership beyond the boundaries of the self as entrepreneurial and individual leader to reach to other people too (Breugst et al., 2012; Cardon et al., 2009).

In contrast to the hegemonic and androcentric discourses of entrepreneurial leadership, which are judged through business growth and competition, the participants associated their success with the immaterial and the symbolic such as the ability to live their passion and to collaborate with others to make a difference in people's lives. These female entrepreneurs considered economic growth as a means to an end rather than being an ultimate goal for their businesses. Despite this disparity between the dominant discourse and the participants' entrepreneurial leadership, this oppressive growth discourse significantly shapes the entrepreneur's identity. This influence indicates how the entrepreneurial leadership identity performed by our participants is interwoven in the context in which they work and shaped by dominant discourses by which they are governed (Anderson and Warren, 2011). The stories are therefore replete with contradiction and tension as competing discourses shape their very sense of their entrepreneurial leader selves.

We are nevertheless conscious that by not including men in our study we first risk presupposing certain essentialist elements regarding masculinity/man and femininity/woman and the entrepreneurial experience. In other words, we can be perceived as assuming the presence of an essence of a dual entrepreneurial leadership where one is conducted by all men and the other by all women (Smith, 2010). Secondly by focusing only on the experience of female entrepreneurs we risk perpetuating the assumption that the male entrepreneur is the norm (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Furthermore, our focus on female entrepreneurs does not mean that we ignore the fact that these women occupy a myriad of social identities (not only gender but also race, age, class, sexual orientation and other multiple layered social identities) which may well be in conflict and tension with each other. Of equal significance, nor does it ignore that some of the meanings associated with their entrepreneurial leadership experiences are not shared by their male counterparts.

Indeed, we suggest that our findings transcend the concept of women and femininity and men and masculinity. There is synergy between the emerging themes from our research and the findings reported in other studies exploring the entrepreneurial experience regardless of gender. For instance, although we could not trace a study that collected empirical data on the influence of passion on the entrepreneurial experience, the conceptual papers of Cardon et al. (2005; 2009) and of Ma and Tan (2005) suggest that passion is an integral part of the entrepreneurial experience irrespective of the sex of the entrepreneur. The same observation is noted in relation to the findings of theme 2 (on making a difference), which resonate with

Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) findings that some of the entrepreneurs in their studies have a communitarian identity and direct their activities to support the development of their communities.

In addition, the hegemonic masculinity that associates the successful entrepreneurial leader with rationality, competition, masculinity and economic growth has been critiqued for excluding not only women but also other forms of masculinities (Nelson and Winter, 1974). Giazitzoglu and Down's (2015) study of 'ten enterprising men' found that male participants do not confirm to this notion of hegemonic normative identity. This representation, which remains largely unchallenged in entrepreneurial studies, has turned entrepreneurs into one homogeneous group whose leadership is monitored and compared unfavourably against this hegemonic masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Smith, 2010). In other words, the literature fails to give an account of the disparate experiences leadership of entrepreneurs in general by limiting them to the constraints of the rational paradigm (Ogbor, 2000). The diversity and subjectivity of the entrepreneurial leadership experience has, therefore, been obscured in so much of the writing on the entrepreneur (Calás et al., 2009). The third theme emerging from the participants' stories, adds further voice to the nascent but growing critical discourse within the literature. This theme problematizes hegemonic masculinity and the associated economic rhetoric that valorises size and growth by bringing to light the tension it creates and its negative impact on performance.

We therefore contend that the stories of female entrepreneurs collected in this study contribute novel insights into gender and entrepreneurial leadership and pave the way for new constructions. Moreover, they provide an entry point to the larger social and economic environment of entrepreneurs and open the door for embracing a plurality of voices that challenge hegemonic masculine norms. These stories can eventually lead to both social and political change by incorporating all those who have been excluded by the narrow hegemonic masculine discourse of entrepreneurial leadership (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Plummer, 1995)

## **Conclusion**

This critical study contributes novel insights into gender and entrepreneurial leadership. The hegemonic masculinity that associates the successful entrepreneurial leader with rationality, competition, masculinity and economic growth excludes women as well as other forms of masculinities (Nelson and Winter, 1974).

This representation which remains largely unchallenged in entrepreneurial studies that draw heavily on quantitative studies (Johnsen and McMahon, 2005; Watson, 2012) has turned (female) entrepreneurs into one homogenous group whose leadership is monitored and compared unfavourably against this hegemonic (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). In other words, the literature fails to give an actual account of the entrepreneurial leadership of (female and male) entrepreneurs by limiting them to the constraints of the rational paradigm (Ogbor, 2000). The diversity and subjectivity of the entrepreneurial leadership experience has, therefore, been obscured in so much of the writing on the entrepreneur (Calás et al., 2009). Our study has sought to add further voice to the nascent but growing critical discourse within the literature that seeks to challenge the dominance of the gendered discourse in entrepreneurial leadership accounts.

One of the limitations of this study and of much qualitative inquiry is the inability to analyse in any great depth from the 16 cases. As interpretivist qualitative researchers we experience a tension between offering a thorough surfacing of the themes across the cases while allowing for the richness of the life stories to emerge. Interpretivist researchers therefore set out to explore the potential for plausible, communicable findings, thus avoiding simplistic solutions to complex human issues (Chase, 2005). As discussed earlier, we felt however that the focus on a small sample has enabled us to achieve our objective in terms of presenting a rich account that offers insights into the literature on gendered and entrepreneurial leaders.

#### *Implications for theory and practice*

The adoption of a critical and feminist poststructural lens in this study has implications for theory as it contributes to a new ontological domain in the literature on entrepreneurial leadership. Our findings and analysis challenge the normative accounts of entrepreneurial practices that continue to privilege a hegemonic masculine discourse whilst marginalising or silencing the voice of women and men who do not fit within the narrow constraints of that dominant discourse. Furthermore, the collection of life history narratives breaks the silence around female entrepreneurs as a marginalised group. It also adds texture and nuance to the literature through recognition of the numerous and heterogeneous ways in which female entrepreneurs narrate their working life histories.



With respect to practical implications, the research challenges the metanarrative of economic growth, which continues to oppress male and female entrepreneurs by bringing to the fore the diverse ways in which entrepreneurs evaluate their experience. The celebration of the diversity of the entrepreneurs and acknowledgement of the multiplicity of entrepreneurial stories through approaches that are based on their own storied accounts will enable entrepreneurs to develop their self-confidence and value their differences as they develop a better appreciation of their unique experiences.

An understanding of the diversity of female entrepreneurs' aspiration and experience is also vital for governmental bodies and agencies offering support for potential or existing female entrepreneurs (Fielden and Hunt, 2011). It is imperative that government policy makers within business communities take heed of these and wider research findings that show multiple ways in which to define entrepreneurial success that extend far beyond the growth discourse.

The study has also implication for entrepreneurial education because the inclusion of the meanings entrepreneurs ascribe to their leadership in their day to day realities is key to achieving an effective entrepreneurial education (Leitch and Harrison, 1999) and may also be of benefit to entrepreneurial leadership development programmes (Leitch et al., 2009). The empirical findings of this study have nevertheless their own limitations. Life history narratives collected through this research are the outcome of a certain context and unique set of interactions. The narratives have inevitably been shaped by the current social, material and ideological context of the UK, and within that, by the socially constructed environment between the researcher and the entrepreneur during the life history interviews. As with most qualitative approaches to research however, our findings offer fresh, in-depth insights into the meanings that these entrepreneurs give to their working lives and to the context of entrepreneurial studies. We therefore encourage further reflective and qualitative research studies of both male and female entrepreneurs that add further insight into the diversity and richness of local, contextual study.

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